

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

Like any profession, Jewish education requires knowledge, skill, talent, training and experience. Like many professions, there are a variety of sub-specialties within the field of Jewish education that require specialized skill sets and training. Listening to the voices of educators in those areas of specialization will enable us to better understand what it takes to do the work — and what they see as the rewards and challenges. Understanding their experiences and motivations will enable policy makers and implementers to design incentives to attract and retain others like them to the field.

Special Education

Jewish Special Education

MARTIN SCHLOSS

Special education is a form of instruction responding to the unique needs of students for whom regular education is either inadequate or inappropriate. There are two types of special education: *interventive* and *alternative*. Special education *intervention* is the provision of academic supports, enabling students to benefit from instruction together with age-appropriate peers and is most suitable for individuals with mild to moderate forms of disabilities, who are capable of benefiting from the traditional school curricula. The *alternative* model is appropriate for individuals with more severe disabilities. Its goal is to prepare students to navigate their way in society to the greatest extent possible.

The skill sets required for success as a special educator include: mastery of traditional school curricula; understanding of learning styles and abilities; proficiency in various forms of intervention strategies; ability to work with parents, fellow teachers, school administrators and

local education officials; knowledge of federal, state and local laws and familiarity with community practices and nuances. Success as a Jewish special educator requires significant additional knowledge, skills and talents. The Jewish special educator must have command of a wide range of Judaic and Hebraic subject matter. The Jewish special educator must often create her/his own curriculum materials. This involves skill in curriculum development, and mastery of both subject matter and intervention methodologies. Finally, whereas the measure of a successful special educator is determined by the level of student progress and achievement in the classroom, the measure of a successful Jewish special educator is determined by how involved the child is in Jewish communal life — beyond the classroom. This calls for a talent to engage the student to the greatest degree possible in the joy of Jewish living and learning.

Rabbi Martin Schloss directs the Division of School Services at the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York.

MATAN: The Gift of Jewish Learning for Every Child

MEREDITH ENGLANDER POLSKY

I was 22 years old when I met Josh, an eight-year-old boy with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. I was his “division head” at the overnight Jewish summer camp where I had spent the previous 12 summers. Six days into his first session at camp, Josh was sent home. We were simply unable to accommodate Josh’s special needs, and my supervisors spent numerous hours helping me understand that allowing him to stay

in camp was not in anybody’s best interest. Josh and I both cried when it was time to say goodbye — my own professionalism seemed far less important than making sure he knew that this adult sending him home was also someone who cared deeply about him — and we even wrote letters to each other for the rest of the summer. We lost touch once fall arrived. I suppose we both lost that feeling of urgency to stay connected.

My story might have ended there – it is possible that eventually I would have put Josh out of my mind, focusing instead on all of the children who were able to share in my home away from home. Four months later, though, I happened to stumble upon a teacher who worked in Josh’s Jewish day school. When I eagerly asked how he was doing, the teacher informed me that Josh was asked to leave the school – they were simply unable to accommodate Josh’s special needs.

One month later, with clear vision and newfound determination, I applied to graduate schools in special education and social work and eventually received masters’ degrees in both. I spent my years in school refining my vision for what would become MATAN: The Gift of Jewish Learning for Every Child. I spent time as a classroom teacher, in both secular and Jewish day schools, in both special and regular education. Even in the regular education classrooms, I gravitated towards the children who were struggling, the children who could not adapt to how I taught but rather for whom I needed to adapt my teaching. And I watched as one committed family after another was forced to remove

their child from Jewish day school so they could get the services they needed.

That’s the challenge of this field. How is it possible that we can pick and choose who deserves to receive a Jewish education? Who can possibly determine that “teaching the Torah diligently to our children” includes only typical learners? How can it be that Jewish education has reached the top of so many funding priorities and yet 10-15% of children don’t currently stand a chance at being beneficiaries?

That’s the challenge, and the reason why I and so many incredible colleagues I have in this field we call Jewish Special Education, are not willing to give up. We have devoted our lives to these children who cannot adapt to the traditional methods of Jewish education. In order for all children to be included in the notion of *klal yisrael*, the world of Jewish education must adapt to meet their needs.

Meredith Englander Polsky is the Co-founder/Director of Programs and Operations at MATAN, www.matankids.org.

Family Education Who Will Teach the Families?

RON WOLFSON

The emergence of Jewish family education as a field has been a welcome one. Stimulated by the call for “Jewish continuity” as a result of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey and fueled in part by the work of the Whizin Institute for Jewish Family Life of the University of Judaism, Jewish family education programming took root in Jewish educational settings throughout North America during the decade of the 90’s. Creative models of reaching and teaching Jewish families were developed and implemented in schools, synagogues, centers, and camps.

Who are these people, the Jewish family educators? Mirroring the broad reach of the work itself, these professionals come from many disciplines. They are classroom teachers, principals, counselors and therapists, community organizers, rabbis, social workers, and librarians. To be successful, they must have strong Judaic content, understand family systems, and be creative teachers who can

relate to both children and adults – simultaneously.

How do they acquire the skills to be effective Jewish family educators? Some students in the graduate programs preparing Jewish educators take a course or seminar in Jewish family education, if one is offered. Some pick up ideas at conferences. At the Whizin Institute, we have welcomed more than 1,000 participants. This is a good start, but hardly enough to meet the long-term goal of providing Jewish family educators in all of our educational settings. I am optimistic that the field of Jewish family education will continue to expand as we empower more families to create a Jewish home that is a *mikdash m’at*, a small sacred sanctuary for our ever-frenzied parents and children. The Jewish future demands nothing less.

Dr. Ron Wolfson serves as Vice President, Fingerhut Assistant Professor of Education, and Director of the Whizin Center for the Jewish Future of the University of Judaism.